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## Eager and Hungry for Music: The WPA Music Project in New Orleans, 1935-1943

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“EAGER AND HUNGRY FOR MUSIC”:  
THE WPA MUSIC PROJECT IN NEW ORLEANS, 1935-1943

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
History

by

Jason Scott Abate

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## Abstract

Of the millions of American workers who suffered economically during the Great Depression of the 1930s, musicians in particular fell on hard times. The live music profession had begun to decline even before the onset of the Depression due to the introduction of new acoustic technologies. In 1935, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in an attempt to put the nation back to work through government-sponsored work projects.

One division of the WPA was Federal Music Project (FMP). A great deal has been written about the WPA, but the Music Project has received little scholarly attention, leaving the stories of musicians in New Orleans and other cities largely untold. This study argues that the Federal Music Project in New Orleans was an unusually successful program due to the special talents of its administrators, the rich pre-existing musical heritage of the city, and the generally positive interaction between the people of New Orleans and the FMP.

## Introduction

Of the millions of American workers who suffered economically during the Great Depression of the 1930s, musicians in particular fell on hard times. Opportunities for live performances dwindled. Furthermore, the live music profession had begun to decline even before the onset of the Depression due to the introduction of new acoustic technologies.<sup>1</sup> By 1925, recorded music had become commonplace on the radio and on home phonographs. The following year, motion pictures incorporated recorded music soundtracks, displacing musicians who had been playing pianos, organs, and orchestral instruments for audiences in silent-movie theaters. When the stock market crashed and the Depression ensued, the number of unemployed musicians in the United States already totaled between twenty and twenty-two thousand. By 1934, seventy percent of all U.S. musicians were either unemployed or underemployed.<sup>2</sup> As a result, in New Orleans and other cities nationwide, many musicians set aside their instruments and turned to manual labor to make a living. Musicians' damaged hands began to lose their touch as the shovel and hammer replaced the trumpet and clarinet.

Some relief, however, would soon be on the way. In 1935, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, by executive order, established the Works Progress Administration (WPA), headed by Harry Hopkins. Through government-sponsored construction and cultural projects, this massive program would serve as a comprehensive employment agency to generate work for the nation's needy. Hopkins believed that the program would benefit the unemployed by revitalizing the common man's self-respect, improving both the infrastructure and cultural tone of the nation, and creating positive publicity for Roosevelt's administration and re-election. For musicians, the WPA not only provided work, but also increased the purchasing power of non-musicians who, despite Depression hardships, were still enthusiastic supporters of musical performances.<sup>3</sup>

Although the WPA sponsored many construction projects—employing 8.5 million persons building or improving 116,000 buildings, 78,000 bridges, 651,000 miles of roadways, and 800 airports—it also employed thousands of artists and musicians. On August 2, 1935, Harry Hopkins launched his pet project, officially called Federal Project Number One, which earmarked funds for the nation's artistic communities. This division of the WPA included four programs: the Federal Writers' Project, the Federal Arts Project, the Federal Theater Project, and the Federal Music Project. The Writer's Project gave work to hundreds of thousands of struggling literary talents and produced a series of historical guidebooks on all states and major cities. The Arts Project produced some 10,000 drawings, paintings, sculptures, and murals in many public buildings, especially post offices. The Theater project reproduced American dramas and delivered many individual productions and plays. But it was the Music Project that ended up affecting the largest number of people while managing to steer clear of the political scandals over supposed communist leanings that plagued the other projects.<sup>4</sup> A great deal has been written about the WPA's Writers' Project, Arts Project, and Theater Project. The Music Project, however, has received little scholarly attention, leaving the stories of musicians in New Orleans and other cities largely untold.

In the case of New Orleans, numerous primary sources provide insights into the local impact of the Federal Music Project (FMP). Particularly useful are the archival materials at the Historic New Orleans Collection, including WPA correspondence, official reports, and publicity of organized events. Also important are oral interviews with contemporary local musicians, located in the Hogan Jazz Archives at Tulane University. Articles and editorials in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* supply additional details. The National Archive in Washington, D. C., contains many clippings from local newspapers and additional letters and official

correspondence. A handful of secondary sources by historians such as Kenneth J. Bindas and Henry Kmen provide perspectives on the national, state, and local implementation of WPA programs.

Based on these various sources, the present study will argue that the Federal Music Project in New Orleans was an unusually successful program due to the special talents of its administrators, the rich pre-existing musical heritage of the city, and the generally positive interaction between the people of New Orleans and the FMP. In a city that had celebrated its musical traditions from its earliest days, the federal government sought to institute a project that would embrace and organize this music for the masses in a way and on a scale never seen before in New Orleans. Although the FMP went to many cities, New Orleans was a special case because of its already well-established musical legacy. In the words of Nikolai Sokoloff, the national director of the FMP, it was a place “eager and hungry for music.”<sup>5</sup>

#### An Administration of Music Enthusiasts

From the national to the local level, most of the administrators of the Federal Music Project (FMP) were themselves musicians or at least music lovers with genuine enthusiasm for their mission. A prime example was Nikolai Sokoloff, who was appointed national director of the FMP by WPA head Harry Hopkins. Sokoloff had a long and notable career in classical music, though he also appreciated the indigenous music of the United States. He was a child when his family immigrated to the United States from his native Kiev, Russia, on May 28, 1886. He began playing the violin at age five and, at the age of thirteen in 1899, his musical talent won him a scholarship to Yale University. As a violinist he later toured the United States, England, and France. He became the Cleveland Orchestra's first conductor in 1918, remaining for fifteen years while also serving as a guest conductor of every major symphony orchestra in the country.

Sokoloff's national reputation as musician and conductor made him a logical choice to lead the FMP. It was his commitment to bringing American music to the common man, however, that made his work as FMP head so distinguished.<sup>6</sup>

Sokoloff appointed Rene Salomon the supervisor of the FMP in Louisiana. Salomon had studied in France where he was awarded prizes by the Conservatory of Marseilles for sight singing, piano, violin, and harmony. He also studied privately under Lina Perez, the Royal Court Singer to the Court of Spain. For fifteen years Salomon was in charge of musical groups at the elegant Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans, including the hotel's string quartet, its quintette, and its twenty-six-piece symphony orchestra. He was also a faculty member at Gulf Park Junior College, and he continued to teach privately and give recitals. In the Sophie Newcomb College at Tulane University, he directed and played first violin for the string quartet, headed the violin department, and taught ensemble classes.<sup>7</sup>

According to Salomon, the purpose of the FMP was "to establish high standards of musicianship, to rehabilitate musicians by assisting them to become self-supporting, to retrain musicians, and to educate the public to an appreciation of musical opportunities." The FMP did exactly what it set out to accomplish under the leadership of Hopkins, Sokoloff, and Salomon. It retrained and rehabilitated musicians who faced discouragement and unemployment. Salomon noted that by March of 1936, the Louisiana FMP "transferred 15,639 individuals to its payrolls." He also reported that the agency employed "vocalists, composers, teachers, librarians, copyists, arrangers, tuners and music binders." As such it was a wellspring for cultivating a cultural tradition while creating employment opportunities.<sup>8</sup>

Salomon found that New Orleans was fertile soil for the mission of the FMP. From its founding in 1718, New Orleans has maintained a tradition of music. Whether through dances,



balls, Mardi Gras celebrations, funeral marches, or a variety of social gatherings, music remained a universal attraction that brought New Orleanians together. With the arrival of Anglo-American northerners as well as immigrants from France, the Caribbean, Spain, Germany, Ireland, and Italy, New Orleans became a multi-cultural melting pot for music. Folk songs, brass bands, opera, classical music, and jazz washed over the city, leaving in its wake an insatiable appetite for more musical performances. An early 1830s *Picayune* editorial observed that there was "a real mania in this city for horne and trumpet playing. You could hardly turn a corner without running into someone trying to blow."<sup>9</sup> It was in this atmosphere that Rene Salomon began his career as head of the Louisiana FMP.

Most of the state's FMP work occurred in New Orleans where the agency held a variety of outdoor and indoor concerts providing free entertainment to thousands of New Orleanians every month. Both black and white music units were established as well as women and children's choirs. The Louisiana FMP gave performances in public schools and encouraged those schools to start their own music programs.

To accomplish all of this, Sokoloff and Salomon depended on such program participants as symphony conductor Arthur Zack; music educator Zelda Huckins Hunt; black community leader S. W. Green; Community Service Director L. DiBenedetto; music therapists Harriet Seymour and Katrina Stollberg; and countless other talent recruiters, event schedulers, and ticket takers. With an array of skills and backgrounds, these various FMP administrators, workers, and supporters helped make the music program in New Orleans a resounding success.

### Musical Uplift for All

Sokoloff issued an order to the Federal Music Project administrators to develop at least one philharmonic orchestra in each state. This proved a boon to classical musicians fortunate

enough to gain a seat in the orchestras. Moreover, Sokoloff required that his FMP orchestras perform more works by American composers. Many, if not most, of these works had never been presented professionally before. By World War II, seventy percent of the music being performed by FMP orchestras was of American origin. Sokoloff had wrought a revolution.

In response to Sokoloff's order, Salomon established in New Orleans what became known as the Little Symphony Orchestra, due to its smaller number of musicians and instruments compared to a full symphony. This became his principal music project in New Orleans for 1936. After several public performances, the Little Symphony broadcast over the radio beginning on November 10, 1936. Both Salomon and James H. Crutcher, the state director of the entire WPA, gave speeches prior to the performance. Salomon reported to Sokoloff that the hour-long broadcast met with many favorable comments from the public.<sup>10</sup>

With the success of the Little Symphony, a public movement began in New Orleans to develop a full symphony orchestra. An energized Sokoloff sent Jacob Baker, an assistant administrator in the WPA, to New Orleans to encourage its formation. Baker visited New Orleans in March of 1936 and spoke with Salomon about the prospect of organizing such a body of musicians. By October 1936, they organized the Civic Symphony Orchestra and appointed Arthur Zack conductor. Eventually the Civic Symphony Orchestra went on to become an independent organization. As a result, the musicians in the Civic Symphony were taken off the relief rolls, freeing up space in the FMP for other musicians. The Civic Symphony Orchestra, later renamed the New Orleans Symphony Orchestra, was a prime example of the FMP's strategy of providing jobs for persons on relief until locating them permanent positions.<sup>11</sup>

The FMP was instrumental in promoting music in public schools by providing musicians to perform concerts and offer music lessons. The agency's attempts to organize musical

performances outside New Orleans were hindered by the lack of funds and the difficulty of maintaining WPA music units in rural areas. The FMP, therefore, turned to high schools throughout the state to serve as a series of stepping-stones in order to extend music to rural Louisiana. Universities such as Southwestern in Lafayette were also utilized in this effort to cultivate music in rural communities outside New Orleans.

Music education for school children and the general public became an important element of the FMP's success throughout the 1930s. On April 20, 1937, Nikolai Sokoloff, in a letter written to O. Lincoln Igou, a Centenary College administrator, endorsed Igou's position on expanding the role of amateur musicians in music education. The initiatives formulated by Sokoloff and Igou developed into an all-encompassing music program reaching far across different sections of society. People who had never been exposed to regular musical performances began to benefit from the FMP's directives. Disabled persons, the elderly, women's organizations, children, school bands and choral units were all enriched by FMP performances.<sup>12</sup>

The Orleans Parish public school system benefited greatly from the FMP's efforts. In September of 1938, according to Salomon, he planned a series of "thirty-five or more weekly concerts to be held in conjunction with the Orleans public school system." He formed a Junior Philharmonic Association to help gifted teenagers develop their musical talent. Mary Conway, music supervisor in public schools, directed this group. The Association enabled young people to perform locally and to meet and study with accomplished musicians. Their concerts were usually held in high school auditoriums and included music appreciation talks before performances. Salomon noted that the series also developed a "music memory contest" regularly broadcast over the radio. The Junior Philharmonic preferred serious pieces such as the "Minuet

in G" by Ludwig von Beethoven, "Gavotte in D" by Johann Sebastian Bach, and "Hungarian Dance No. 5" by Johannes Brahms.<sup>13</sup>

The FMP worked closely with parent-teacher associations. At the request of the Gentilly PTA in New Orleans, for example, Salomon sent Zelda Huckins Hunt from the FMP to help them organize and direct their own musical activities. Hunt not only organized the PTA members' musical rehearsal, but also provided lectures on music appreciation. In addition, Hunt's organizational skills helped create an all-boys chorus at the Martin Behrman School in Algiers, a community near New Orleans. Principal Harte of Martin Behrman had requested Hunt's assistance in establishing a music program. With the school lacking funds to initiate a program, the FMP provided its services free of charge. The boys' musical training made such an immense impression on Salomon that he had them participate in the National Music Week of 1937. The Martin Behrman chorus also took part in the Children's Concerts held by the New Orleans Civic Symphony. Hunt personally funded the auditorium rent used for these community chorales.

For the FMP's annual Spring Festival, Hunt coached the Children's Chorus at St. Vincent's Orphan Asylum. She also directed piano classes for the orphans. A performance at St. Elizabeth's Home by the WPA Concert Orchestra was accompanied by a choir of thirty children, all under the age of fourteen. The performance was broadcast over the radio, which, according to Salomon, gave the children great pleasure.<sup>14</sup>

In 1939, the Louisiana FMP revived the New Orleans tradition of organizing outdoor concerts in West End Park, the Lakefront, and Lafayette, Beauregard, and Jackson Squares. These open-air performances had not been offered for twenty years. The concerts were designed to reach and invigorate underprivileged children by exposing them to live music.<sup>15</sup>

The FMP's overall success was reflected in countless letters from parents expressing gratitude for the agency's effort in inspiring and educating a generation of children. A letter dated December 5, 1938 from Mrs. H. Verrelet, for example, thanked the FMP for providing music classes for her daughter: "I want to take this opportunity to thank you for your kind interest and patience shown to my daughter since she became your pupil she is doing very well under your splendid method. I am very grateful to the WPA because it would be impossible for her to study music under present conditions. I hope you will be able to keep up this wonderful work."<sup>16</sup>

The New Orleans Federal Music Project also coordinated musical performances on local university campuses. Many concerts were held on the campus of Tulane University and Newcomb College at Dixon Hall. Chamber music recitals seemed to be a favorite at this location, as well as acapella choirs and glee club performances.<sup>17</sup> The many FMP public concerts in New Orleans ranged from numerous park performances to a variety of entertainments at hospitals, prisons, schools, boys' homes, mental institutions, retirement homes, community dances, and a multitude of musical fetes. Performances by the FMP became part of the fabric of the New Orleans music scene. No other city in Louisiana could boast of such variety and abundance of musical performances. A WPA band or unit was performing daily in virtually every part of the city.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to performing at the aforementioned venues, the FMP came to the aid of other WPA projects. On January 1, 1938, the FMP provided the music for the Federal Theater Project's production of *Jambalaya* a light comedy set in Louisiana. The FMP also supplied music at the opening ceremony to celebrate the completion of the WPA Calliope Housing Project, performing five band concerts for the residents.<sup>19</sup>

Further, the FMP aided organizations outside the WPA. The music for Tulane University and Newcomb College plays, glee clubs and school festivals was often performed by the FMP. Members of the New Orleans FMP regularly joined the New Orleans Civic Symphony. The FMP provided music for the dedication of Wisner Playground. It also offered concerts promoting the New Orleans Opera Association's bid to rebuild the French Opera house, which burned down in 1919. Finally, FMP musicians played at the dedication of City Park, an area that would later prove to be a favorite site for public concerts.<sup>20</sup>

The FMP also helped recruit Red Cross volunteers to aid in the relief of flood victims in April 1936. The FMP bands played at Red Cross booths on Canal Street. Their music attracted large crowds who either joined the Red Cross as volunteers or donated money. One booth raised \$605 in donations. A year later, Eleanor Roosevelt's visit to New Orleans and lecture at the Municipal Auditorium was accompanied by the FMP Orchestra.<sup>21</sup>

In March 1936, Salomon sent a letter to Sokoloff describing the FMP's popularity in New Orleans. He wrote that "there is a tremendous demand for community singing, the coaching of choral groups in civil and charitable organizations, concerts at charitable institutions, and music in conjunction with other programs at civic organizations." He pointed to requests for concerts he received from other organizations such as the Young Women's Christian Association and the Young Men's Hebrew Association. In response to these numerous requests, the FMP continued to provide services to the community through musical entertainment and instruction.<sup>22</sup>

#### The FMP Musicians

Letters from individuals requesting employment poured into the FMP office. These letters were written primarily by musicians in the New Orleans area who had been laid off. Musicians or spouses on their behalf begged for employment. These men and women were

generally willing to accept any type of work, but preferred using their musical talents. Salomon insisted that administrative assistants respond to every letter requesting work. The FMP's responses were often sympathetic, but explained the harsh realities of the government's shortage of funds. Petitioners were frequently referred to state channels of assistance in order to help them obtain employment.<sup>23</sup>

Musicians participating in the FMP played in various venues approximately ninety to ninety-five hours a month. Depending on the economic situation in the nation, musicians' pay varied. Salaries averaged approximately \$94 a month. In the hopes of not losing musicians during the economic crisis of the 1930's, Salomon often kept them employed at reduced hours to avoid breaking his budget. Some members of the music union, however, accused Salomon of malfeasance, not realizing that the FMP on the national level had decided to change the pay rate so that more musicians could get more hours, but at slightly lower pay.<sup>24</sup>

One of the reasons for the above complaint may have been the control the FMP tried to exercise over employment, as it was the largest employer of musicians in town. In the early years of the FMP, rehearsals were scheduled in the morning for about three hours and then the bands would go to a performance or two, sometimes splitting the band to cover overlapping commitments. By about two o'clock in the afternoon the musicians were finished and had the rest of the day off, allowing enterprising FMP musicians to earn extra money playing other engagements. FMP members like Eddie Morris recalled the reaction of the local FMP leaders when they discovered that he and others musicians were moonlighting in the evenings. To prevent this competition amongst musicians for jobs, the FMP required practice or playing sessions be scheduled throughout the day. Morris recalled that if a musician missed roll call he would be out of a job with the FMP.<sup>25</sup>

Under the FMP, blacks had more opportunities to participate than in other WPA projects. Furthermore, the role of black musicians was a tremendous asset to local musical performances.<sup>26</sup> Large numbers of black FMP members participated in choral, educational, and instrumental performances and in the composers' forums.<sup>27</sup>

Salomon did little, however, to promote classical training of black musicians. Believing that African Americans could not comprehend classical music, he limited the black community's musical opportunities to spiritual and band music.<sup>28</sup> Despite these racist attitudes, Salomon did organize music festivals featuring black musicians, composers and choruses. The monthly Louisiana FMP reports for November 1938, for example, noted that the black military band performed more concerts than did its three white counterparts combined--the white military band, the Novelty Dance Orchestra, and the Concert Orchestra. Furthermore, at each concert, the black military band had more people in attendance than the three white units put together.<sup>29</sup>

Salomon made arrangements to send WPA-paid instructors into the public schools to teach music classes. In 1936, he hired white music teachers to serve in black school in New Orleans.<sup>30</sup> Beginning in November 1938, however, he authorized the black military band to hold classes in band, chorus, and rhythm for black students. He appointed Harriet Robison to teach a course in theory and harmony. A total of 114 classes were taught, with 1,480 pupils attending.<sup>31</sup> By 1940, Salomon also hired at least one black music teacher to serve in a black school.<sup>32</sup>

The FMP held music appreciation concerts for black schools, accompanied by the black military band, soloists and chorus. The FMP also assigned Willie B. "Bunk" Johnson, a music appreciation teacher to three black schools in New Iberia, Louisiana, a town west of New Orleans. According to Salomon, this teacher arranged "large groups of young people interested in organizing bands. " Salomon concluded that because of the FMP's efforts in Iberia Parish,



music shop owners in New Orleans reported an increase in the sale of musical instruments to students from New Iberia.<sup>33</sup>

In July 1940, Salomon asked S. W. Green, a black businessman and Commander of the Black Knights of Pythias, to compile a list of prominent black New Orleanians who would agree to serve on a citizens' advisory committee to help the FMP organize black musical events. The citizens' committee was so successful in securing wider public participation and support for black FMP programs that it soon became a prototype for other similar initiatives. Salomon immediately began organizing citizens' committees for the white FMP undertakings. By November 1940 he had assembled seven committees, six white and one black, all of them acting as liaisons between the FMP and the community.<sup>34</sup>

On at least one occasion some black musicians objected to the discriminatory treatment they received from the New Orleans FMP, though the details of the affair remain obscure. Sokoloff received a complaint signed by nine former members of the black WPA band in New Orleans. They had been dismissed from the band and removed from the FMP payroll because they had failed the competence examination that all FMP musicians were regularly required to take. They also claimed they were able to read music and teach rhythm and harmony. They noted that they had been members of the band for a number of years and that their competence had never been questioned. Insisting they had been unfairly treated, they charged discrimination by their white supervisor, Joseph Martinez, and by the all-white board of examiners. Salomon dismissed the black musicians' charges on the grounds that there was no evidence of discrimination to support their claim. The nine then forwarded their complaints to Nikolai Sokoloff. He made some inquiries but not fast enough to satisfy the nine, who proceeded to send

their complaint to Harry Hopkins, who quashed it. Salomon, to his credit, managed to shift the nine to another WPA project.<sup>35</sup>

Louis Nelson, an African-American FMP member, recalled how Joe Martinez required all the members to be able to read music in order to stay employed in the FMP band.<sup>36</sup> Martinez's motivation was to have a body of professional musicians capable of performing a broad repertoire of music. This action also satisfied Salomon's intent to reduce the number of musicians to a manageable size. In one account, Milton Martin, a fellow FMP member, related the experience of Frankie Dusen who was able to mask his music illiteracy by his talent to play by ear.<sup>37</sup>

Other criticisms of Salomon's policies occasionally surfaced. He was sometimes accused of playing favorites and discriminating against deserving white musicians. For example, Joseph Benvinetto, in a letter to Harry Hopkins dated 1 June 1937, criticized Salomon for not including "good musicians" in the WPA in New Orleans.<sup>38</sup> Benvinetto appears to have been a musician under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), a WPA precursor, and was angry for never getting certified in the FMP. Salomon refuted these charges in correspondence written to Hopkins. Contrary to Benvinetto's claims, Salomon assured Hopkins that he repeatedly hired talented musicians and rotated them into more secure jobs, thereby taking them off the relief rolls as quickly as he could. Eventually Salomon was cleared of any wrongdoing in this matter.<sup>39</sup>

Another controversy involved Salomon and Mr. J. Pepitone, president and business agent of Musicians Union Local 174. Pepitone wrote a letter in March of 1936 to J. Weber, the head of the American Federation of Musicians, accusing Rene Salomon of malfeasance in office. Specifically, Pepitone accused Salomon of violating WPA policy by improperly charging admission at two public school events and by providing music at a parochial school event.<sup>40</sup>

Salomon wrote Sokoloff to clear his name and to clarify the FMP's involvement in all of these cases. Regarding public schools, the money collected at St. Philip School provided free lunches to poor and underprivileged children. In the McDonogh School episode, a lack of communication was noted as the reason for any appearance of wrongdoing on the FMP's part. The Little Symphony band was supposed to play, but cancelled; therefore, a WPA band was sent in its place. The leader of this WPA band then cancelled his group's performance, but not before collecting \$93.80. This money was not returned to the FMP, but rather was given to the Parent-Teacher Association to "buy shoes, clothes, or lunches for needy pupils." The third incident at a parochial school event involved a YWCA carnival and a pageant for working girls, at which Salomon allowed an orchestra to play. Since this was held at the Dominican Convent, Salomon admitted he may have made a mistake in charging money, but he did so with the good intention of helping the cause of public education. The Dominican Convent organized this pageant to raise funds for scholarships. Convincingly, Salomon defended his position and showed he had not violated the spirit of the law.<sup>41</sup>

The FMP's efforts to bring music to the masses met with some logistical difficulties. Musicians resented attempts to regulate rehearsal times, to disqualify those lacking formal music training, and, according to some, to treat black and white musicians differently. Overall, however, the benefits far outweighed the shortcomings. The FMP encouraged a successful give-and-take among the administrators, musicians, and audiences. Many New Orleans concert traditions were reinvigorated, and varied programs ranging from traditional southern genres to newly written classical compositions reached many who previously had had limited opportunity to enjoy organized musical events.

## Music as Therapy

The Louisiana FMP pioneered the field of music therapy, working closely with other FMP units around the country. Music therapy provided recreation as well as entertainment to institutionalized persons whose access to music was otherwise limited. Harriet Ayer Seymour, a noted music therapist in New York, concluded that the most effective categories of music were "folk songs, familiar songs, dances, simple classical music, and opera excerpts."<sup>42</sup> The Louisiana FMP held music appreciation classes in settlement houses for adult women. These women had a two-hour lesson every Tuesday, and occasionally the FMP gave concerts at the settlement. One elderly woman commented, "It makes me feel that life is not yet over for me....I thought my brains had dried up, but now I know that I can still learn new things." Katrina Stollberg was the WPA's music teacher in these and other settlement houses. Her therapy program started with simple tunes, folk songs, John Philip Sousa's "March Militaire Francaise," and Strauss waltzes. Stollberg reported that no matter what they played, the women went back to their homes more refreshed and happy as a result of their enjoying music together.<sup>43</sup>

The Louisiana WPA director became enthusiastic about music therapy and began sending out regular memoranda to FMP administrators informing them of new developments and projects. Health workers reported that many mental patients benefited from music in hospitals. It brought many of the patients out of their delirium and stabilized their emotional state. Deaf children also responded to the rhythmic vibrations of music. This was documented in a letter from Sister Mary Amata to Salomon thanking him profusely for scheduling a Mr. Peterson to perform for the children at the Chinchuba Institute for the Deaf in Marrero.<sup>44</sup>

The FMP Narrative Reports from 1936 occasionally mentioned sending transcripts of folk music to Nikolai Sokoloff at his behest. Salomon reported that most of the folk music in

Louisiana had already been collected by Lyle Saxon of the Federal Writers' Project and stored in the Tulane University's Howard Tilton Library. John W. Lomax of the Folk Lore Department in Washington, D. C., had also collected Acadian ("Cajun") and black folk music and even made some recordings. Salomon offered to have his copyist transcribe the music if Sokoloff wished, but the subsequent narrative reports did not verify if the FMP actually performed the task.

The excerpts below are from traditional black folk songs, transcribed by FMP copyist Vertner Jane Long from research completed many years earlier by George Washington Cable, Maud Cuney Hare, and Lafcadio Hearn.<sup>45</sup> Both of these love songs, according to Cable, concern the tradition of quadroon balls held in New Orleans as early as 1805 and continuing into the antebellum period. These balls were limited to free women of color and white men.<sup>46</sup> Cable interpreted the first song as one sung by a free man of color, expressing his jealousy of a quadroon male escorting a free women of color to the ball. The quadroon male was able to gain admittance to the ball in the capacity of a fiddler:

Yellow girl goes to the ball,  
Nigger lights her to the hall,  
Fiddler man!  
Now what is that to you?  
Say, what is that to you?  
Fiddler man?

The other song, according to Cable, was sung by a male slave, and reflected his sorrow of unrequited love for a free woman of color who was attending the ball dressed in a colorful gown

reminiscent of a bird's bright colors and plumage. Such a dress could only come to her from someone in the “master-class,” in Cables’s words.<sup>47</sup> Sadly, the slave's lowly status prevents him from pursuing his romantic desire:

If you were a little bird  
And myself, I were a gun,  
I would shoot you - boum!  
Ah! dear jewel  
Of Mahogany,  
I love you  
As the hog loves mud!<sup>48</sup>

Like much of the music collected and cataloged by the FMP, these songs, performed for segregated audiences in the 1930s, revealed the complexities of race relations in Louisiana, both past and present. Folk music seems to have appealed to black and white alike. Performances were completely booked for the vocal quartet specializing in folk songs. Prior to each performance, the master of ceremonies would explain the historical background of each selection. Salomon reported that these activities improved music appreciation citywide.

## Conclusion

In August 1939 the WPA turned over the FMP to state control. Despite the program's change in sponsorship, the FMP continued its existence as the renamed WPA Music Project. From 1941 to 1943, the Project formed servicemen's music clubs. These units were to provide music by and for enlisted men. The WPA helped the military to organize glee clubs and dance bands, as well as to promote general musical knowledge. These newly organized groups performed in army canteens and United Service Organization (USO) clubs.<sup>49</sup>

Meanwhile, the WPA underwent several administrative changes. Harry Hopkins resigned as head of the WPA in December 1938 to become Secretary of Commerce and was replaced by F. C. Harrington. Nikolai Sokoloff resigned as the FMP director in May 1939 and was replaced by Earl Moore.<sup>50</sup> Rene Salomon continued to serve in his capacity as head of Louisiana's WPA Music Project until its dissolution in 1943.

Overall, the FMP had a very positive influence on the residents in New Orleans. A 1938 letter from L. DiBenedetto, Community Service Commissioner, expressed gratitude to Salomon for the "splendid cooperation of the Music project." DiBenedetto further conveyed his enjoyment of the concerts performed in the city's playgrounds. He recognized the overarching influence of the Louisiana FMP on the city by acknowledging the sheer quantity of persons who attended nightly concerts.<sup>51</sup>

In the *Times-Picayune* of March 3, 1939, Rene Salomon provided statistics on the accomplishments of the Federal Music Project programs. On the national level between October 1935 and February 1939, the FMP held 192,904 concerts, entertaining approximately 128,268,000 persons. In Louisiana, the FMP held 3,887 concerts bringing together 11,488,600 persons.<sup>52</sup> These numbers correlate with the monthly narrative reports and newspaper clippings,

which showed the New Orleans FMP giving from fifteen to thirty concerts in any given week. At the dedication of City Park Stadium in April, 1937, at which the FMP provided the music, attendance was estimated at 25,000. The largest attendance by far for a single month occurred in March, 1939, with an aggregate audience of 61,640.<sup>53</sup>

Further, all New Orleanians benefited from the FMP. Although racial boundaries still existed, the FMP attempted to harness the talent of black Americans in New Orleans. Women and children had opportunities to develop their musical talent. The FMP offered opportunities to female band ensembles and to talented children left destitute by the Depression. Public and private schools, as well as universities, also benefited from the FMP's concerts which students attended. Further, the FMP was instrumental to the development of the New Orleans Symphony Orchestra, music education in dozens of schools in Louisiana, public instruction in music for amateurs, relief work for unemployed musicians, community choral events, and composers' forums. In fine, the FMP was an economic and cultural boon to the people of New Orleans.

The FMP in New Orleans left an indelible mark on both artists and participants. From 1935 to 1943, there was a lively give-and-take between federal administrators and their objectives on the one hand, and locals with their tastes and needs on the other. The administrators arrived in a city already rich in musical traditions and enabled local musicians to expand and revitalize those traditions. This project reached across racial and class barriers to move whole communities into a celebration of not only classical music, but also jazz and folk music, including brass bands, quartets, and choirs of all varieties and racial compositions. An African-American member of the WPA band, Lionel Ferbos, who today is 94 years of age, told an interviewer in 1991 that "there was a wonderful spirit in the band-good morale, that's



important. It taught me a lot and I was a far better musician as a result of having worked with the WPA band. It was hard, but we had some good times."<sup>54</sup>

With the advent of World War II and the subsequent end of the Great Depression, the mission of the WPA came to a close. Jobs were abundant and there was little need for large-scale relief. Many men entered the military, and though the WPA managed to perform concerts at military bases through 1942, by 1943 the WPA was discontinued.

The legacy of the WPA continues to this day in the form of music courses taught in schools, the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra and the New Orleans Opera Association Guild. Popular annual music festivals draw music lovers to New Orleans to such venues as the Jazz and Heritage, Essence, and Satchmo festivals. Rene Salomon understood he was not just providing relief for unemployed musicians, but ensuring a future for music in Louisiana.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Nikolai Sokoloff, "The Federal Music Project," *Volume of Proceedings of the Music Teachers' National Association*, vol. 1936 (1937): 56.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Javis, "Cultural Nationalism in an Urban Setting: The Philadelphia Experience with Federal Project Number One of the Works Progress Administration, 1935-1943" (Ph.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1995), 273-274.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth J. Bindas, *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), viii-vx.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., xiii-xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Nikolai Sokoloff, "Better Days for Music," *Harper Magazine*, April (1937): 1.

<sup>6</sup> William B. Davis, "Music Therapy Practice in New York City: A Report From a Panel of Experts, March 17, 1937," *Journal of Music Therapy*, vol. 34, no. 1 (1997): 70-73.

<sup>7</sup> WPA General Correspondence File, 1935-1943, Microfilm Roll 651.311, Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, [hereafter referred to as WPA, HNOC]. Letter from John M. Lyons to Nikolai Sokoloff, 2 January 1936.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Announcement made by Master of Ceremonies at WPA music festival in New Orleans, April 1936.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Kmen, *Music in New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), 212.

<sup>10</sup> WPA, HNOC. Letter from Rene Salomon to Nikolai Sokoloff, 10 November 1936.

<sup>11</sup> *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), "Expressing the Public Mind," 23 March 1936.

<sup>12</sup> WPA, HNOC. Letter from O. Lincoln Igou to Nikolai Sokoloff, 27 March 1937.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., Letter from Rene Salomon to Nikolai Sokoloff, 13 September 1938.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., Letter from Rene Salomon to Nikolai Sokoloff 12 March 1937.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., Letter from Rene Salomon to Nikolai Sokoloff, 22 April 1939.

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- 16 Ibid., Letter from Mrs. H. Verrelet to Mrs. Arewa, 5 December 1938.
- 17 Ibid., Narrative Report, from Rene Salomon to Nikolai Sokoloff, 2 June 1937.
- 18 Ibid., Letter from Rene Salomon to Nikolai Sokoloff, 22 April 1939.
- 19 *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), "Calliope Project Typical Example of Other Units," 21 March 1942.
- 20 WPA, HNOC. Letter from Rene Salomon to Nikolai Sokoloff, 9 August 1940.
- 21 Ibid., Letter from Rene Salomon to Alma s. Munsell, 16 April 1936.
- 22 Ibid., Letter from Rene Salomon to Nikolai Sokoloff, 20 March 1936.
- 23 Ibid., Letter from Ellen S. Woodward to A. C. Vitellaro, 7 August 1937.
- 24 Ibid., Letter from James H. Crutcher to Nels Anderson, 7 February 1936.
- 25 Eddie Morris, Interview by Richard Allen, 12 February 1960, Interview Reel II, p. 29, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.
- 26 Irene Jackson, ed., *More Than Dancing* (Hartford: Greenwood Press, 1985), 242. On the national level, however, the WPA employed less than five percent of unemployed blacks.
- 27 WPA, HNOC. Letter from Rene Salomon to Nikolai Sokoloff, 30 November 1938.
- 28 Bindas, *All Of This Music*, 82.
- 29 WPA, HNOC. Letter from Rene Salomon to Nikolai Sokoloff, 1 December 1938.
- 30 Ibid., Letter from Rene Salomon to Nikolai Sokoloff, 15 February 1936.
- 31 Ibid., Letter from Rene Salomon to James H. Crutcher, 31 January 1938.
- 32 Ibid., Letter from Frances L. Diboll to Alma S. Hammond, 27 May 1940.
- 33 Ibid., Letter from Rene Salomon to Dr. Earl V. Moore, 4 June 1940.
- 34 Ibid., Letter from Rene Salomon to Mrs. Ray Fitzgibbons, 15 November 1940.
- 35 Ibid., Letter from John Donnell to Harry Hopkins, 16 September 1936.

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- 36 Louis Nelson, Interview by William Russell, 18 April 1960, Interview Reel I, p. 5, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.
- 37 Marton Milton, Interview by William Russell, 21 December 1964, Interview Reel III, p. 7, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.
- 38 WPA, HNOC. Letter from Joseph Benvinetto to Harry Hopkins, 1 June 1937.
- 39 Ibid., Letter from Leo G. Spofford to Ellen S. Woodward, 24 June 1937.
- 40 Ibid., Letter from S.D. Ozer to Nikolai Sokoloff, 11 March 1936. S. D. Ozer, a music union official, outlined exactly what the violations were by citing the "Appendix B to Supplement No. 1 to Bulletin No. 29-Financial Procedure for projects operating under WPA Sponsored Federal Project No. 1." According to the Appendix: "Performance, with or without the charging of admission, may be given before the following audiences: a) The general public (i.e., open to all); b) Under-privileged groups, such as settlement houses, hospitals, etc.; and c) Organizations or groups of government employees, who have not in the past paid for such services."
- 41 WPA, HNOC. Letter from Rene Salomon to Nikolai Sokoloff, 25 March 1936.
- 42 Davis, "Music Therapy Practice in New York City," 78.
- 43 WPA, HNOC. Narrative Report from Rene Salomon to Nikolai Sokoloff, 12 March 1937.
- 44 Ibid., Letter from Sister Mary Amata to Rene Salomon, 12 March 1937.
- 45 George Washington Cable, "Creole Slave Songs," *The Century Magazine*, April, 1886.
- 46 R. Randall Couch, "The Public Masked Balls of Antebellum New Orleans: A Custom of Masque Outside the Mardi Gras Tradition," *Louisiana History* 35 (Fall 1994): 411. For more information on New Orleans balls, see Monique Guillory, "Some Enchanted Evening on the Auction Block: The Cultural Legacy of the New Orleans Quadroon Balls" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1999).
- 47 WPA, HNOC. Letter from Vertner Jane Long to Nikolai Sokoloff, April 1936.
- 48 Ibid., Letter from Rene Solomon to Nikolai Sokoloff, June 1936.
- 49 *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), "Music Supervisor Leaders Discuss National Action," 12 May 1941.

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50 Bindas, *All Of This Music*, 105-106.

51 WPA, HNOC. Letter from L. Di Bennedetto to Rene Salomon, 21 July 1938.

52 *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), "Music Supervisor Leaders Discuss National Action," 12 May 1941.

53 WPA, HNOC. Letter from Rene Salomon to James H. Crutcher, March 1939.

54 Mike Hazeldine, "Lionel Ferbos Recalls the WPA Band," *New Orleans Music* vol. 2, no. 4 (1991): 24-28. Mr. Ferbos continues playing music at the Palm Court Café and Jazz Club in New Orleans.

## Vita

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